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Dear Interested Party,

In early July 2021, lightning storms passing over northern Idaho ignited multiple wildfires on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests (IPNF). The Character Fire Complex began in Shoshone County, Idaho as two separate fires: the Prichard Fire and the Deceitful Fire (which had already incorporated the Cinnabar Creek Fire). The fires were first detected on July 7 and affected a total of approximately 12,400 acres on the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District. The Forest Service is proposing salvage and restoration activities within the Character Complex fire perimeter to recover the remaining economic value and benefit of forest products, reduce hazards threatening human health and safety, and establish more resilient vegetation conditions to capitalize on opportunities to move toward desired conditions described in the IPNF Forest Plan. The proposal has been identified as the Character Fire Salvage and Restoration Project. The project area is generally located north of Interstate 90 and south of the North Fork Coeur d'Alene River, east of Character Ridge and west of Prichard Creek/Kings Pass, in Shoshone County, Idaho in portions of T49N-R3E; T49N-R4E; T49N-R5E; T50N-R3E; T50N-R4E; T50N-R5E; Boise Meridian (see Figure 1, Vicinity Map). A larger-scale map and other documents providing information about this project are available on the IPNF website (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61090>) and will be updated as the project develops.

The following narrative describes conditions that resulted from the Character Complex fires, activities proposed within the fire perimeter to trend conditions toward those identified by the Forest Plan, and the anticipated benefits and potential impacts from implementing the proposed activities. Estimated acreages and miles are based on best available information at this time; additional analysis may reduce, but would not increase, the extent of proposed salvage activities. Transportation routes in the project area are still being assessed, as discussed in the description of proposed road work.

Effects of the Fire

Fires in the Character Complex burned with varying severity, leaving a mosaic of burn patterns that ranged from unburned timber stands, rock outcrops, and riparian areas, to areas where tree crowns were completely consumed, i.e., a spectrum of burn intensity from low to high occurs throughout the project area. Much of the project area was burned by surface fires which consumed all or most of the organic material on the forest floor (Figures 2 through 5). Viewed from a distance, some forest stands may still appear green because the tree crowns were not burned. However, in many of those stands, the trees are now dead as their roots were killed due to the intense heat generated by the wildfire as it consumed the extremely dry fuels (accumulated leaf litter and woody material) on the forest floor.

Most of the existing timber stands in the project area are comprised of primarily western hemlock and grand fir. Occasionally, on colder sites above 4,000 feet in elevation, stands contain mountain hemlock, subalpine fir, spruce and lodgepole (most of the project area is below 4,500 feet). Since all of these tree species are easily damaged and/or killed by low to moderate severity fires due to thin bark and shallow roots, low rates of survival are expected throughout the fire area and which is what we continue to observe in the previous Grizzly Fire Salvage project area.



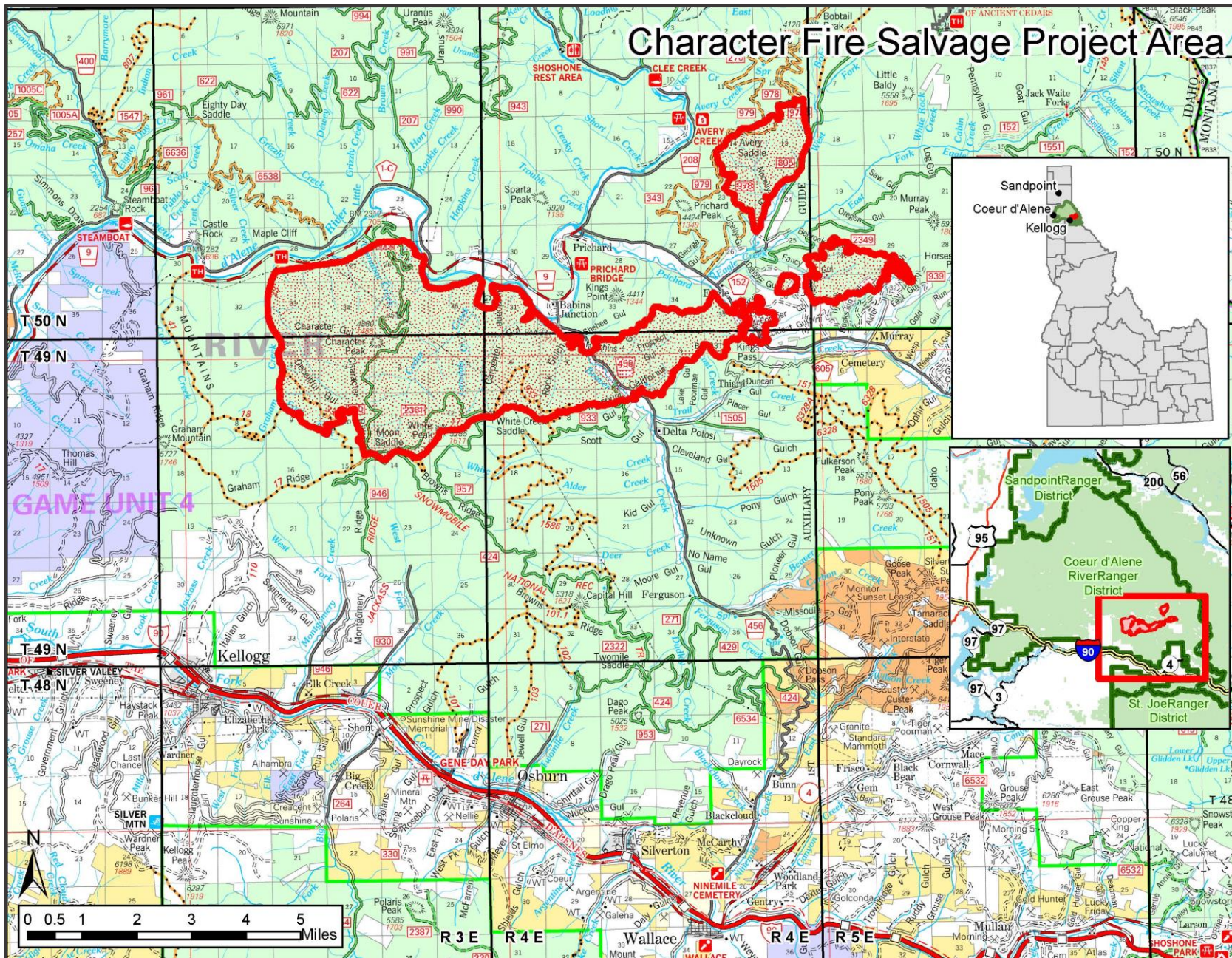


Figure 1. Vicinity map of the Character Fire Salvage project area.





Figure 2. Panoramic view looking west down Prospect Gulch from Kings Ridge. Forest Service photo, August 23, 2021.





Figure 3. Oblique view (looking east) of crown scorch and crown consumption from Character Ridge. The upper end of Lansdale Creek is visible in the lower left; White Peak is visible in the upper right. A portion of Carpenter Gulch is visible in the background. Forest Service photo, September 1, 2021.



Figure 4. Low to moderate bole char, severe root damage, and low to moderate crown scorch which will result in >80% mortality due to fire intolerant species composition in Lansdale Creek. Forest Service photo, October 22, 2021.





Figure 5. Western hemlock tends to suffer severe root damage even from low intensity backing fire due to shallow rooting habit. Photo taken in Lansdale Creek. Forest Service photo, October 22, 2021.

Purpose and Need for Action

Action is needed in the project area to:

- Recover economic value of forest products in a timely manner to contribute to employment and income in local communities and avoid loss of commodity value. As described by Forest Plan (FW-DC-TBR-01), “Salvage of dead and dying trees can be used to capture as much of the economic value of the wood as possible while retaining the amount needed for wildlife habitat, soil productivity and ecosystem functions.” Timber salvage is proposed in stands where it is estimated the dead and dying trees have enough merchantable timber to provide an economically viable timber sale that would capture the commodity value necessary to accomplish project objectives while contributing to employment and income in local communities and at the same time protecting other resources in the area to the extent possible. A viable sale is critical to ensure that project objectives can be accomplished.
- Reduce hazards threatening human health and safety. The Forest Plan desires “A transportation system is in place that provides safe and efficient public and administrative access to the Forest for recreation, special uses, forest resource management, and fire management activities,” (FW-DC-AR-07). Currently, roads within the fire perimeters have a heightened risk of danger trees falling, blocking access and threatening public and employee safety. Over time, additional danger trees will fall because of increased defect, mortality, weathering agents, heavy snow, and other environmental factors. With existing and predicted risk, there will be an ongoing need to remove trees that pose hazards where it is logistically feasible along area roads to improve safety for forest users. The Forest Plan also includes direction to reduce hazardous fuels within the wildland



urban interface and to manage forest vegetation in these areas in an effort to reduce the risk of large wildfires: “Hazardous fuels are reduced within the WUI and other areas where values are at risk. Fire behavior characteristics and fuel conditions exist in these areas that allow for safe and effective fire management,” (FW-DC-FIRE-02). Infrastructure, including homes, communities, critical powerlines (Avista and Bonneville Power Administration), water sources etc., were threatened by the 2021 wildfire, and continue to be at risk due to the increase in dead and downed fuels that were created by the fire mortality and will continue to build up over time as a result of ongoing fire mortality. This risk can be mitigated in a portion of the burned area by removing unmerchantable timber (standing and down trees that are not of sufficient size or not accessible for commercial salvage). A combination of methods (such as cutting and chipping, piling and burning, and/or mastication) would help reduce flame lengths and lower fire intensity, resulting in the type of fire behavior that can be more easily managed, with safer conditions for firefighters and the public.

- Re-establish forested conditions and/or facilitate recovery to meet management objectives outlined in the Forest Plan. “More of the forest is dominated by western white pine, ponderosa pine, western larch, and whitebark pine. Conversely, less of the forest is dominated by grand fir, western hemlock, western redcedar, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and subalpine fir,” (FW-DC-VEG-01). Current forest composition in the project area is dominated by less resilient western hemlock, grand fir, cedar and Douglas-fir trees rather than western white pine, ponderosa pine, and western larch (FW-DC-VEG-01) that are more resistant to drought, fire and insects, . Salvage and fuel reduction activities would prepare the land to be safely planted with the appropriate early seral tree species.

Insects (primarily beetles), stain and decay fungi, and weather all act as deterioration agents in fire-killed timber; deterioration of the fire-killed and damaged trees has a number of impacts. Lumber quality is reduced, merchantable volume of wood (and therefore, value) is reduced and most importantly, the deteriorating dead trees pose substantial safety hazards to the public and forest workers. Consequently, the ability to accomplish the purpose and need for the project is tied to the timing of the salvage harvest, fuels reduction, and hazard tree removal. If authorized, harvest activities would begin in the summer of 2022 and be completed within two years with tree planting continuing into the future for approximately five years. Fuels and hazard tree removal would be ongoing for approximately ten years or more.

Proposed Activities

Salvage Logging

The intent of this project is to focus on those areas where activities would result in desired conditions consistent with those described in the Forest Plan while minimizing impacts to other resources. For example, salvage activities on south/southwest aspects were generally avoided, as shade from the dead overstory may be needed to ensure establishment of new conifer seedlings on these types of sites. Salvage on sites burned by crown fire was also generally avoided for the same reason because the fire removed the duff layer and the source of fine litter in the canopy, leaving the underlying soil more exposed to erosion than other sites where needles were still present in the canopy after the fire passed.

The proposed salvage units were identified by experienced foresters during field reconnaissance. In the fall of 2021, crews visited areas having salvage potential and applied a coarse filter to validate those areas. Units were included in the proposed action if most of the trees were dead, in the process of dying, or expected to die in the near future due to the combined impacts of the fire itself (root kill, cambium kill on the tree bole and/or crown consumption) with other secondary agents, such as bark beetles, insect attacks or root disease pathogens. Stands on northerly and easterly aspects that historically supported



western white pine and western larch were specifically targeted in order to ensure that the forest plan objective to restore these two conifer species is a focal objective of the salvage effort.

Forest stands in the fire perimeter were not included as proposed salvage units if it was determined that tree mortality was low, or if the majority of the fire-killed volume within the stand was not merchantable because of excessive rot and/or other defects. Areas with high fire severity were not included, because of the existing impact to resources on those sites and because the timber is not likely to have commercial value. Riparian areas were excluded because they will buffer sediment caused by the fire, natural or management activities. Only stands near existing road access were considered and no new system roads would be constructed. Salvage is not proposed in inventoried roadless or in stands that still meet minimum old growth criteria after accounting for fire related mortality.

In addition, the areas needed to have reasonable access for timber removal using either ground or cable yarding systems. Due to the projected lower economic value of burned trees, expensive logging methods, such as helicopter yarding are not considered economically feasible at this time.

Commercial Salvage Logging

This project would remove dead and dying trees from approximately 3,200 acres through commercial salvage logging, all within the fire perimeter. This represents approximately 26 percent of the total fire area within the Character Complex fire perimeter. Salvage logging would provide economic value and benefit, reduce hazards, prepare sites for tree planting to restore forested conditions, and reduce potential residual fuel buildup in the project area.

A preliminary estimate suggests the proposed salvage would generate approximately 20 to 30 mmbf (million board feet) of volume available for sale, contributing toward attainment of the Forest Plan objective for the annual sale of timber (FW-OBJ-TBR-01). The anticipated volume is sufficient to reasonably expect that this project would result in multiple viable timber sales, having a positive economic effect to local communities and counties as described by Forest Plan desired conditions (FW-DC-SES-01 through FW-DC-SES-04). This also works toward the Forest Plan goal to provide a sustainable level of timber products for current and future generations; and that production of timber from National Forest System lands contribute to an economically viable forest products industry (GOAL-TBR-01).

A variety of silvicultural systems and logging systems would be used as appropriate for the conditions found at each site (tree species existing/desired on site, proportion of trees affected by the fire, severity of the burn, slope, aspect, etc.). Selected silvicultural systems will be based on site-specific conditions and are within the timber and vegetation practices outlined in the Forest Plan (FW-STD-TBR-01, and FW-STD-TBR-04 through FW-STD-07).

In the units that have fairly gentle topography (approximately 20% of the proposed acres), harvested trees would be removed using ground-based mechanized equipment such as harvesters and skidders. Units with somewhat steeper topography (roughly 80% of the proposed acres) would be harvested using cable yarding systems or tethered logging systems.

Snags and Tree Retention

Most of the merchantable dead, dying or otherwise damaged trees would be cut and removed from within the salvage units. Larch, white pine and ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir seed trees would be retained along with unmerchantable (rotted, checked, or small-diameter) trees. Observations of post-salvage conditions in the Grizzly Fire Salvage indicate that this retention will meet or exceed the snag retention and snag recruitment guidelines for wildlife habitat and soil productivity purposes. Many of the larger-diameter grand fir, western hemlock, and cedar present in these stands will be retained because they have substantial defect from Indian paint fungus and other stem damaging agents. While these damages often make the trees unmerchantable, they are still valuable for numerous wildlife species and also contribute to



Forest Plan snag and coarse woody debris retention guidelines and desired conditions. Western larch, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine and white pine are also present in smaller amounts. Where present, these species will be preferentially retained, unless they pose a safety hazard during logging operations or their removal is required incidental to location of skid trails or skyline corridors.

Openings Over 40 Acres

The proposed salvage activities would result in the creation of 34 openings, 16 of which would exceed 40 acres in size. When the Forest Service proposes to conduct harvest activities in a wildfire area using even-aged management, as in this case, and the harvest areas are in excess of 40 acres in size, it is a requirement that we provide a 60-day public review (FW-STD-TBR-02) and gain Regional Forester approval. Where natural catastrophic events such as fire, windstorms, or insect and disease attacks have occurred, 40 acres may be exceeded without 60-day public review and Regional Forester approval, provided the public is notified and the environmental analysis supports the decision (Northern Region Supplement of Forest Service Manual 2400-Timber Management, Chapter 2470 – Silvicultural Practices).

Old Growth

Prior to the wildfires, there were approximately 2,253 acres within the Character Complex fire perimeter that met the definition for old growth or were identified as old growth recruitment as defined by the Forest Plan. During project development, pre-fire old growth stands that were entirely or partially included in preliminary salvage polygons were reviewed to determine how much of the stand was likely to survive. If it was determined that they were likely to still meet the old growth definition were dropped from proposed harvest. About 835 acres are proposed for salvage in stands or portions of stands that no longer meet old growth criteria due to excessive mortality from the fires. Stands where salvage logging is proposed no longer meet the old growth definition; that assessment is based on initial observations by a certified Forest Service silviculturist and can be adjusted during contract development and layout if necessary. These stands no longer meet the definition of old growth, as they do not contain enough live trees per acre that are both old enough and large enough, and/or do not contain enough total live basal area per acre to meet the minimum old growth criteria as defined by Green et al. (2011).

The vast majority of the trees that are both large and old in stands that had been old growth prior to the fire tend to be grand fir and/or western hemlock, nearly all of which died in the fire because thin bark and shallow rooting habit that is prone to fire damage. Most of these large grand fir and hemlock also have substantial heart rot in their stems due to Indian paint fungus infections which defect them so badly that they are not merchatable and will therefore be left on site to provide wildlife habitat in the form of snags and or coarse woody debris.

Fuel Reduction

The Forest Plan includes direction to reduce hazardous fuels within the wildland urban interface and to manage forest vegetation in these areas in an effort to reduce the risk of large wildfires (FW-DC-FIRE-02 and FW-OBJ-FIRE-01). A combination of methods (such as cutting and chipping, piling and burning, prescribed burning and/or mastication) would help reduce flame lengths and lower fire intensity, resulting in the type of fire behavior that can be more easily managed, with safer conditions for firefighters and the public. Salvage activities would include the removal of dead and other hazard trees, allowing for safer use and travel by forest visitors and fire managers in the treated areas. In addition, any future fire management activities would likely be more efficient and effective.

Reforestation

Following salvage logging and fuel reduction activities, tree planting would occur in all of the areas where salvage harvest occurs and in portions of the fire area that burned with high severity and are lacking onsite or nearby sources of western larch, ponderosa pine and/or white pine seed. Reforesting the



burned areas with native and more resilient tree species would enhance the overall recovery process, meet restoration objectives, and trend the vegetation component toward desired future conditions. Tree seedlings would be planted in the salvage units after harvest and site preparation activities are completed. In the salvage harvest units, blister rust-resistant white pine and western larch seedlings would be planted in combinations appropriate for individual stands. Western red cedar, ponderosa pine, Englemann spruce and hardwoods may be included in the planting mix where appropriate.

Tree seedlings would also be planted in unsalvaged areas where the fire burned severely. This will result in more planting acres than salvage acres. The agency is being intentional about the changed condition by capitalizing on the opportunity to replant in burned areas where it is logistically and economically feasible. Cedar and hardwoods may be planted within very moist riparian type settings, including riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs) that occur within or immediately adjacent to proposed salvage units.

Planting in harvested units would be designed to meet requirements to adequately restock the lands within five years after final harvest (FW-STD-TBR-03).

By planting western white pine, western larch, ponderosa pine and western red cedar, the composition of the forest stands would be improved. Relative to most of the other native tree species, white pine, larch, ponderosa pine and cedar are more resistant or resilient towards wildfires, droughts, insect and disease agents and they are generally longer-lived species. As a result of planting these desirable tree species, the composition of the affected stands would trend toward the desired conditions that are presented in the Forest Plan (FW-DC-VEG-01). By planting the desirable tree species and doing so in relatively large “patches” on the landscape, the proposed action would result in an improvement to the pattern of stands that have a desirable composition and more closely resemble historical patch sizes. This improvement would be consistent with the Forest Plan (FW-DC-VEG-05).

A certain amount of coarse woody debris is important for soil productivity, wildlife habitat and other ecosystem functions. By salvaging some of the burned trees in the area, the proposed action would reduce some of the standing trees that would otherwise eventually fall down and produce coarse woody debris. However, even in the salvage areas, coarse woody debris would be retained as specified in the Forest Plan (plan component FW-GDL-VEG-03) as a result of breakage from harvest activity and leaving non-merchantable trees in the area.

Road Work

Salvage harvest activities were identified in areas that could be reached from existing roads and trails that are open to public motorized use and/or administrative use. No new system (permanent) road construction is proposed. While existing roads and landings would be used wherever feasible, the implementation of this project would require building temporary roads to provide safe access and facilitate conventional logging systems. Currently, it is estimated that approximately 10 miles of temporary road construction would be needed; however, roads in the area are still being assessed, and additional miles of temporary road construction may be identified during project development.

Temporary roads and landings would be designed to standards appropriate for the intended timber hauling; while considering safety, cost of transportation, and potential to impact resources, in compliance with 16 USC 1608(b) and (c), and to make progress toward achieving forest-wide desired conditions (FW-DC-AR-07).

At the completion of their intended use, temporary roads would be decompacted, recontoured to the approximate shape of the surrounding terrain, and seeded or covered with debris to prevent erosion and unauthorized use, and to accelerate hydrologic and vegetative recovery.

Some closed roads would be opened temporarily for administrative access to proposed salvage areas.



After activities are completed, these roads would remain closed to the current travel management system and be closed by a gate, earth barrier or front-end obliteration and, where appropriate, culverts and associated fill may be removed, the road surface out-sloped, water bars installed, the road prism revegetated with native species, and/or compacted surfaces scarified.

To support large haul trucks and equipment, some road reconstruction and basic and deferred road maintenance would occur on existing system roads. The type of maintenance activities would depend on actual site conditions and could include clearing brush from the road shoulders to improve sight distance, blading and shaping the road, improving road curves for safe haul vehicles, cleaning and maintaining ditches and drainage features, and improving the road surface.

Only the road improvements needed to complete the treatments would be implemented. If a salvage unit is dropped from the project, the associated road work would be dropped from the project as well. No existing system roads open to the public would be decommissioned with this project.

Anticipated Effects

As described above, the proposed activities are anticipated to have long-term beneficial effects in terms of economic benefit and value, human safety, forested conditions, and mitigated fire hazard. This section summarizes the anticipated effects of the proposed activities to other natural resources and human uses. Preliminary analysis indicates that the proposed activities would not result in significant direct, indirect or cumulative effects to any of the resources considered, as described below. More detailed analysis will be available as the environmental analysis progresses.

Standard Design Features (including Best Management Practices)

The interdisciplinary team identified standard design features to minimize or avoid adverse effects which could occur as a result of implementing proposed activities in the project area. The design features are based on Forest Plan direction and policy, best available science, and site-specific evaluations; and would be applied (except where specifically stated otherwise) during project implementation. Design features are an integral part of the proposed action and would be applied on the ground during project implementation.

Fish and Water: Section 208 of the Clean Water Act authorizes and encourages state and local management of nonpoint pollution sources, which include forest practices. This project incorporates best management practices (BMPs) and needed watershed restoration measures that minimize impacts to water quality and beneficial uses as laid out in the R1/R4 Soil and Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook and [2015 Idaho Forestry Best Management Practices Field Guide](#) to help meet the requirements of the Clean Water Act. Site-specific BMPs will be developed based on the proposed activities, water quality objectives, and site specific characteristics in order to avoid or minimize potential adverse impacts to water quality and watershed function from project activities. State monitoring results and professional judgment are used to develop site-specific BMP prescriptions.

All applicable BMPs would be applied to activities proposed in the Character project area. Contract provisions that are requirements in timber sales are the mechanism by which BMPs are implemented during activities. Additionally, monitoring of BMPs occurs during and after harvest in order to ensure correct implementation and effectiveness.

Inland Native Fish Strategy Standard TM-1a requires that fire salvage activities only occur within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) where present and future woody debris needs are met and where adverse effects can be avoided to inland native fish. No salvage activities are proposed within RHCAs under the Character Fire Salvage and Restoration project.



Specific Unit Design Features

In addition to standard design features and best management practices, unit-specific design criteria will be applied to avoid or protect resources on a site-by-site basis. For example, the analysis of effects to soil may indicate the disturbance level at a specific unit is approaching the threshold identified by Forest Plan soil standards. Design criteria, such as modification of the unit, use of slash mats, etc., could be applied to that unit to ensure compliance with soil standards. Another example might be where topography would require use of an excavated skid trail, or a tractor swing to remove timber in a safe and environmentally sound manner. These design criteria address conditions found on-the-ground during implementation of project activities, and are applied through the timber sale contract, which includes both standard and site-specific standard contract provisions.

Soils

There is an extensive framework in place for the evaluation and determination of soil condition. For this analysis, soils were evaluated in the context of the Forest Plan guidelines for soils and the Regional Soil Quality Standards. This project would not cause detrimental impacts that exceed Region 1 soil quality standards. A minimum of 85 percent of each unit would maintain full productivity as evaluated under Northern Regional standards.

Salvage units are proposed only where soils have low potential for mass failure, low surface erosion hazards and low land type sensitivity. The IPNF soils specialist will field check specific units in spring of 2016 and validate assumptions made during the initial analysis. If modifications to the unit or activities would not reduce impacts to the point of compliance, the unit would be dropped. As a result, all applicable forest plan standards and legal requirements for protection of soils would be met.

Fine woody material (less than three inches in diameter), including needles and leaves would be left on site with the goal of attaining a minimum of 60 to 70 percent cover within each unit to protect soil and increase nutrient cycling with the ultimate goal of limiting the amount of bare soil. The coverage amounts would come from the combined totals of coarse woody debris and fine biomass left on-the-ground.

The practice of tethered logging was not prevalent during development of the Forest Plan, so this logging technology was not considered when writing guidelines for soils. Specifically, FW-SOIL-GDL-01 was created with untethered heavy machinery in mind and is in place to prevent excessive soil disturbance that is created on steep slopes due to the loss of traction and stability of heavy equipment. Attaching a tether to heavy machinery for steep slope harvesting is intended to increase the operability, stability, and safety of the equipment. Both initial research and local observations indicate that using a tethered assist may be successful at minimizing soil disturbance on steep slopes, therefore it is reasonable to believe that application of this harvest method would help meet the intent of FW-SOIL-GDL-01.

Any unit that is considered for tethered harvest would be evaluated by a soil scientist to verify that there is opportunity for success in meeting the regional soil quality standards based on site-specific conditions. After implementation, all units where tethered systems were applied would be monitored to evaluate and document actual disturbance to develop site-specific disturbance data for these new systems, and to validate the conclusions made by the literature review in the context of local soil and environmental characteristics.

Hydrologic Resources and Fish Habitat

Sediment levels in project area streams are expected to exceed pre-fire levels due to the burn severity and the large area affected during the 2021 fires. Sediment levels in channels often increase following fires due to an elevated risk of increased runoff surface erosion, channel incision, road failures, hydrophobicity, and mass wasting. These sediment levels are expected to be highest for the first few years following the fire, until vegetation recovers.



By following best management practices and mandatory design features, increased sediment delivery to streams remains a possibility as a result of the project, but those levels would not be expected to generate impacts above those caused by the fires. Further, sediment levels generated by the salvage project would not prevent the recovery of stream habitat to pre-fire conditions.

Water temperatures are expected to slightly increase in streams where the fire consumed streamside vegetation and overhead canopy. The fire salvage project would not remove any remaining living or dead trees within a 300-foot buffer on either side of fish-bearing streams, and therefore, is not expected to affect existing stream temperatures in the short-term. Riparian area tree planting is expected to occur along certain stream corridors in the project area, and would likely have long-term beneficial effects on stream temperatures once trees are large enough to provide shade over the streams.

No living or dead trees would be removed from riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs), which are 300-foot buffers on either side of fish-bearing streams; therefore, this salvage project would not have a negative impact on existing wood quantities and future wood recruitment potential in area streams. Since no salvage activities are proposed in the RHCAs, this project is not expected to have negative impacts to riparian zone function. Proposed tree planting in certain riparian areas would contribute to longer-term benefits in riparian areas impacted by the fires.

Suitable habitat for cold-water stream fishes is a function of stream flow, channel morphology, gradient, and the various forms of instream cover created by boulders, bedrock, and large wood from fallen trees or exposed root wads. Increased sediment levels from the fires would likely be one of the greater effects to aquatic habitat than project activities, since large scale fires are within the range of natural variability in western forests and project derived sediment would be difficult to quantify against background levels with any significance because of the application of design criteria, best management practices, and Inland Native Fish Strategy direction.

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat

Preliminary analysis of potentially-affected wildlife species and their habitat indicates there are several which do not have suitable habitat in the project area, are not regularly present or expected to be in or near the proposed activities, or would not be affected to the extent that there would be increased risk to the species. Implementation of standard and unit-specific design features would further minimize effects of the proposal to ensure compliance with all applicable Forest Plan standards and legal requirements for wildlife, including the Endangered Species Act.

Salvage activities would occur in approximately 26 percent of the acres burned in the Character Complex Fires. Treating just a portion of the burned areas would ensure consistency with the Forest Plan desired condition (FW-DC-WL-15) and guideline (FW-GDL-WL-08) to leave a well-distributed diversity of patch sizes and burned conditions, based on fire characteristics and pre-fire forest conditions, to provide habitat for species whose habitat requirements include recently burned forests (such as black-backed woodpecker). Design criteria for snag retention within treated areas are based on the best available science and are consistent with Forest Plan guidelines (FW-GDL-VEG-04 through FW-GDL-VEG-06).

If Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive (TES) species and/or significant habitat are discovered before or during project implementation, the sale administrator and the district wildlife biologist would be notified so measures could be taken to avoid impacts. Measures could include altering or dropping areas within proposed units, modifying the proposed activity, or implementing buffers. Contract provisions for protection of TES species are utilized in all timber sale contracts and have been effective in protecting these resources.



Cultural Resources

All effects to cultural resources will be addressed and negated through in-field inventory and design criteria. The Character Fire Salvage and Restoration Project would not cause either an "effect" or "no adverse effect" situation as defined by the National Historic Preservation Act, because the project design features would exclude all known or located cultural resources from the project implementation.

Cultural resource sites would be avoided or buffered to ensure that the integrity of the characteristics and values which contribute (or may contribute) to the properties' significance would not be affected. Should any previously unrecorded cultural resources be discovered during project implementation, activities that may be affecting that resource would be halted immediately; the resource would be evaluated by a professional archaeologist; and consultation would be initiated with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), as well as with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, if required, to determine appropriate actions for protecting the resource and for mitigating any adverse effects on the resource. All forest plan standards and legal requirements would be met.

The Character Fire Salvage and Restoration scoping, comment period, and documentation is being utilized as part of the project's compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act including public involvement and tribal consultation on issues of national heritage.

Consistency with Legal Requirements

The Character Fire Salvage and Restoration project has been designed to avoid or minimize potential impacts to natural resources as much as possible, and will comply with all applicable laws, regulations, and direction.

The preliminary analysis demonstrates that this project is consistent with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests Land Management Plan (2015 Revision), including all applicable standards and guidelines. The preliminary analysis also illustrates that this project is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Council on Environmental Quality regulations, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and other applicable laws, policies and regulations.

Compliance will be achieved by careful design of the project when identifying where, when and how activities would occur, as well as site-specific design criteria that would be applied during project implementation.

IPNF Forest Plan

Subject to valid existing rights, all projects and activities authorized by the Forest Service must be consistent with the applicable forest plan components (16 USC 1604(i)) as described at 36 CFR 219.15 of the 2012 Planning Rule. The Character project is designed to be consistent with relevant objectives, standards and guidelines of the IPNF Forest Plan (including the Inland Native Fish Strategy), and would make progress toward relevant goals and desired conditions.

Management Area 2b: A small amount of project area is within Management Area 2b. Within the project area, MA 2b applies to river segments that have been classified as eligible for "Recreation" designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers System described in the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan (page 61) states that "Timber harvest is allowed to maintain or restore the values for which the recreation river was identified..." (MA2B-GDL-TBR-02).

Management Area 5: There is a small portion of the project area that is designated as Management Area 5 (Backcountry/Restoration). This area is within the Graham Coal Inventoried Roadless Area. As described in the Forest Plan (page 69), natural ecological processes, including fire, are the primary forces



affecting the composition, structure, and pattern of vegetation (MA5-DC-VEG-01). Therefore, no activities are proposed on lands designated as MA5.

Management Area 6: The Forest Plan designated the majority of national forest system lands in the project area as Management Area (MA) 6 - General Forest. The Forest Plan (page 71) describes this management area as “relatively large areas with roads, trails, and structures, as well as signs of past and ongoing activities designed to actively manage the forest vegetation.” The Forest Plan (page 71) also states, “Many of the acres within this MA are suitable for the production of timber on a regulated basis, providing wood fiber in response to regional and national demand,” and, “Most of the WUI on the Forest occurs within MA6 and activities designed to reduce hazardous fuels are common.” The desired condition for vegetation within this management area is:

In much of this MA, vegetation management activities have a dominant role in affecting the composition, structure, and pattern of vegetation. These management activities trend the vegetation towards the desired conditions. Although natural ecological processes and disturbances are still present, they are influenced more by human activity in this MA than in others. (Forest Plan, page 71)

The majority of proposed activities would occur in MA6.

Other Legal Requirements

In addition to Forest Plan consistency, the proposed action is being designed to comply with all other legal requirements. For example:

National Forest Management Act (NFMA): The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires that all projects must be consistent with specific applicable NFMA requirements, such as protection of soils, streams and other water bodies, restocking and vegetation manipulation, clearcutting and even-aged management, and temporary roadways.

Clean Water Act and Idaho State Water Quality Standards: The Clean Water Act (CWA) directs Federal agencies (e.g. the Forest Service) to meet federal, state, interstate and local substantive as well as procedural requirements respecting control and abatement of pollution in the same manner and to the same extent as any nongovernmental entity. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ) is delegated authority for control of water pollution under the CWA and administers that authority through the Idaho Environmental Protection and Health Act (Title 39, Ch. 1, Idaho Code), the Idaho Water Quality Act (Title 39, Ch. 36, Idaho Code), and water quality standards under the authority of the Idaho Administrative Procedures Act (Hydro-R018, IDAPA 58.01.02).

Sections 208 and 319 of the CWA recognized the need for control strategies for nonpoint source pollution. DEQ is the lead agency for implementation of its Idaho Nonpoint Source Management Plan, under the authority of Section 319 of the CWA and Idaho Department of Lands has the authority to administer the Idaho Forest Practices Act (Title 38, Chapter 13, Idaho Code) and the responsibility to ensure compliance with best management practices (BMPs) to control nonpoint sources of pollutants. Rules pertaining to the Idaho Forest Practices Act and application of BMPs are found at IDAPA 20.02.01. BMPs are practices, techniques, or measures that are determined to be a cost effective and practicable means of preventing or reducing pollutants generated from nonpoint sources to a level compatible with water quality goals (Idaho Code 39-3602.(3)).

The Character Fire Salvage and Restoration Project will meet the Clean Water Act and Idaho State water quality standards by utilizing applicable best management practices and adhering to the relevant total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) by maintaining or reducing sediment delivery to project area streams and by maintaining or increasing riparian shading. Best management practices and specific design features designed to protect soil and water will be applied.



The proposed action is also consistent with Executive Orders 11988 and 11990 (Floodplains and Wetlands) because no activities would occupy or adversely modify wetlands or floodplains. Furthermore, the Character project will adhere to Inland Native Fish Strategy criteria incorporating specific protections for these areas.

Clean Air Act: This project will be consistent with the Clean Air Act. Burning of forest fuels affects air quality through the production of smoke, which contains particulate matter that can be a human health hazard. Under the proposed action, there is the possibility of prescribed burning following salvage activities (for example, burning landings and possibly some small hand or excavator piles). The District will conduct any pile or landing burning in accordance with the recommendations of the Montana Idaho Airshed Group. The District strictly complies with the procedures and recommendations of the Airshed Group and the proven protocols assure compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements regarding air quality. The Character project will be consistent with Forest Plan components regarding air quality.

Endangered Species Act: Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that any action authorized, funded, or carried out by the agency is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or destroy or adversely modify their critical habitat.

This project will meet the Endangered Species Act because no effects are expected to occur to listed plant, fish or wildlife species or their habitat in the project area. The “No Effect” determination for ESA species and their habitat is due to the larger effects of the wildfires, the location and design of activities, and the application of best management practices.

A list of threatened and endangered species and designated critical habitat that may be present in the Character Fire Salvage and Restoration Project area was obtained from Fish and Wildlife Service on November 16, 2021. Terrestrial wildlife species on the list include the threatened Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) and threatened grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*). On September 12, 2014 the Fish and Wildlife Service issued a final rule to revise designation of critical habitat for Canada lynx . In December 2020, grizzly bear presence in the project area was changed from not present to “may be present” by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Migratory Bird Act: The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, as amended, made the taking, killing or possessing of migratory birds unlawful. Executive Order 13186 of 2001 clarified the responsibilities of Federal agencies regarding migratory bird conservation and directed Federal agencies to evaluate the effects of Federal actions on migratory birds with an emphasis on species of concern. The Executive Order also directed Federal agencies to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding their role with respect to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

In December 2008, the Forest Service entered into an MOU with the Fish and Wildlife Service that further clarified the responsibility of the Forest Service to protect migratory birds (USDA and USDI 2008). In the MOU, the Forest Service agreed to consider the most up-to-date Fish and Wildlife Service list of Birds of Conservation Concern (USDI 2008) when developing or amending land management plans, and to evaluate the effects of agency actions on migratory birds within the NEPA analysis process, focusing first on species of management concern along with their priority habitat and key risk factors. Priority habitats identified in Idaho for migratory birds are riparian habitat, non-riverine wetlands, sagebrush shrub, and dry ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir/grand fir forests.

For the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, the bird species of management concern include those species designated as sensitive. The Idaho Panhandle National Forests is in compliance with the MOU by analyzing the potential effects to these bird species and their habitat at the project level. The proposed Character project treatment areas are post-fire habitat and will only treat dead and dying trees. As such,



the treatment areas do not contain shrubs and any trees expected to live will remain.

For species dependent on snags, the proposed action would retain in salvage units any live trees expected to survive, as well as enough snags within salvage units to meet or exceed Forest Plan guidelines. Although the quality and quantity of habitat will be reduced, high quality habitat will still be available to support snag-dependent species, including black-backed woodpeckers. For other species, the priority habitats will not be impacted.

National Historic Preservation Act: No direct, indirect or cumulative effects to cultural resources are expected with implementation of the proposed action. By applying the design features to buffer or avoid cultural resources, negative effects would be adequately avoided. The Section 106 process will be completed to National Historic Preservation Act standard. Direction in 36 CFR sections 800.4(b)(2) and 800.8(3)(c) allows utilization of the finding of no significant impact to bind the agency to completion of the National Historic Preservation Act section 106 process prior to project implementation. Tribal consultation on heritage properties and socio-cultural elements will be completed through appropriate Tribal consultation. Consultation with the Coeur d'Alene Tribe is ongoing.

These and other legal requirements will be addressed in the Character Fire Salvage and Restoration Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice documents.

Commenting on this Project

Public comments are very important in helping us determine a more informed course of action for the area, one that balances the public interests and objectives of the agency. Public input, in the form of substantive comments that are factual and solution based, are the most useful for us. Comments are considered substantive when they are within the scope of the proposal, are specific to the proposal, have a direct relationship to the proposal, and include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider (36 CFR § 219.62).

This is the notice and comment period for this project. Electronic comments can be submitted on the IPNF website (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61090>). In the "Get Connected" box on the right hand side, click "Comment on Project" to submit your comments. Electronic comments may be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word documents (.doc). If submitting electronic comments please put the project name in the subject line.

Written comments can be mailed to Character Fire Salvage Project, Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District, 2502 East Sherman Avenue, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814. In keeping with precautionary measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the office is not open at this time for hand-delivered submissions. If you need to hand deliver your comments please call the District office (208) 664-2318. Comments may also be faxed to (208) 769-3062.

Comments concerning this action will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of a legal notice in *Coeur d'Alene Press*. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this proposal. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon date or timeframe information provided by any other source. Regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period.

Any comments received, including names and addresses of those who comment are considered part of the public record for this project, available for public inspection, and released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.



If you would like to receive future mailings about this project, please subscribe to electronic mailings under the “Get Involved” section on the Idaho Panhandle National Forests website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/ipnf>. If you prefer to receive mailings by postal mail only, please contact us at (208) 664-2318, or by emailing the project leader, Kerry Arneson (kerry.arneson@usda.gov).

Emergency Situation Determination Request

The Idaho Panhandle National Forest intends to request an emergency situation determination (ESD) from the Chief of the Forest Service. 36 CFR 218.21(b) defines an emergency situation as “a situation on National Forest System (NFS) lands for which immediate implementation of a decision is necessary to achieve one or more of the following: (1) relief from hazards threatening human health and safety; (2) mitigation of threats to natural resources on NFS or adjacent lands; (3) avoiding a loss of commodity value sufficient to jeopardize the agency's ability to accomplish project objectives directly related to resource protection or restoration.”

If granted, an ESD would waive the 90-day predecisional administrative review process commonly referred to as the 218 objection process. **If an ESD is granted, this 30-day comment period would be the last opportunity to engage with the Forest Service prior to a decision.** If an ESD is not granted, the opportunity to object to the project would remain.

For More Information

I am the responsible official for this project. If you have questions regarding the Character Fire Salvage and Restoration Project, please contact me at (208)-769-3001 (email daniel.scaife@usda.gov) or Kerry Arneson, Project Leader at (208) 769-3021 (email kerry.arneson@usda.gov).



DANIEL SCAIFE
District Ranger

